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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000713

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TAGS: [KDEM](#) [LE](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#)

SUBJECT: MGLE01: ELECTORAL COMMISSION PRESIDENT BOUTROS  
"TIRED AND DISGUSTED"

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Sections 1.4 (b)  
and (d).

SUMMARY

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¶1. (C) Meeting the Ambassador and emboff as the Lebanese press reported that the two Maronite members of his electoral commission had resigned in protest, electoral commission president Fouad Boutros complained that he was "tired and disgusted." The octogenarian Boutros is Lebanon's most reliable cynic and pessimist, but some of his disaffection could certainly be chalked up to zero-hour difficulties in finalizing the districting and representational sections of Lebanon's draft electoral law. Boutros said that Lebanon's political bosses were pushing commission members to keep majoritarian electoral rules with large muhafaza electoral districts. He complained specifically that Patriarch Sfeir had renounced his support for a proportional electoral system at the last minute and said that the Patriarch, "listens to fanatics." As frustrated as Boutros was by the electoral issue, however, he seemed more preoccupied and disheartened about the prospects for the national dialogue and Lebanese presidency. He said it was impossible to believe that the Damascus regime would ever leave Lebanon alone, or that Hizballah could be persuaded to give up its arms. He dismissed Michel Aoun as "unbalanced" and "removed from reality," and worried that the "inexperienced, average and unexceptional" Saad Hariri was planning to take the prime minister's job for himself. END SUMMARY

¶2. (C) Senior Lebanese statesman and President of the National Commission for Reform of the Electoral Law, Fouad Boutros, received the Ambassador and emboff at his penthouse apartment overlooking the Mediterranean on March 7. Boutros, now in his late eighties, is renowned for his years of experience as Lebanon's Ambassador to the United Nations, Foreign Minister, and his incessant (though often appropriate) skepticism about Lebanon's state of affairs. On this day, he confessed to the Ambassador at the outset of the meeting that he was "tired and disgusted. Few people in Lebanon have kept their minds," Boutros complained. "Some are utopians, others fools, others adventurers. Few have kept their minds."

THE ELECTORAL LAW:  
THE HEAVIES WEIGH IN

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¶3. (C) Describing his draft electoral law, Boutros said that overall, the commission had produced a comprehensive law that was largely ready to hand over to the government. He

complained, however, that Lebanon's political bosses were putting last minute pressure on commission members to scrap any plans for proportional representation and redistricting. They want to keep a majoritarian electoral system with large muhafaza-style districts. He cited Walid Jumblatt, Patriarch Sfeir and other Maronite "heavies" as the worst offenders, who, in Boutros's estimation, "just want to go on being little dictators." Boutros said that his only two Maronite commission members, Ziad Baroud and Michel Tabet, had "withdrawn" their participation in protest over political interference. Contrary to initial press reports, Boutros said they hadn't actually resigned, however, and suggested they had only temporarily withdrawn as a political statement.

(Comment: Baroud and Tabet issued a joint press statement the day after their reported resignations, however, confirming that they had resigned. End Comment.) Now, with the electoral commission suddenly considering as many as five different electoral formulae combining various elements of proportional and majoritarian systems with different district sizes, Boutros said his only chance to get out of the stalemate was either to ask the Siniora government to settle the districting issues itself, or to present all variations of these plans to the government. Boutros made it obvious that, having spent the last seven months drafting a comprehensive and cohesive draft law, he was not happy with either of these two remaining options.

14. (C) Boutros said there was one possible compromise: a combined proportional and majoritarian system whereby people would vote simultaneously on two lists, one for the muhafaza (large district), and one for the qada (small district). Without going too deeply into the details, Boutros said this plan would satisfy most of the Christian and Druze concerns about losing influence in a proportional system. Nonetheless, Boutros cursed the Patriarch's fickle support

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for a proportional draft law, noting that until just a few days ago, Sfeir had supported a proportional representational scheme. "I don't know who he's been talking to," Boutros grumbled, "but they're fanatics."

NO JOY IN BAABDA  
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15. (C) Boutros said that President Lahoud was blocking progress on a wide variety of issues, but doubted that he could ever be persuaded to voluntarily resign. "The only way to go is through the high court. There's some room for interpretation (of the constitution) to get him out," Boutros advised. The former minister was nonplused, however, when it came to possible replacements for Lahoud. Repeating a refrain that seems to come from the mouth of every anti-Aounist in Lebanon (and there are plenty), Boutros described the former general as "unbalanced." "He's removed from reality," Boutros said. He speculated that Aoun has only lost about five percent of his Christian support because of his recent alliance with Hizballah, and wondered how he could retain the following of so many Lebanese Christians: "I saw him the other day. He says he is going to change U.S. policy. He's utopian. His mind is not stable. He's a big problem ... and the French don't trust him either. The Christians only like him because of the past. Because they think he was persecuted. But if he becomes president and behaves like a crazy man," Boutros shook his head, "I don't know..."

16. (C) Boutros admitted that Nassib Lahoud would be his own choice for president, but worried whether he had sufficient support. "The Patriarch wasn't for (Nassib) at first, maybe because he's married to a Sunni. But the Patriarch has changed his mind now, and sees Nassib as the best in comparison to Boutros Harb and Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh. But the Patriarch won't take the initiative either. It's very dangerous." Boutros then floated Charles Rizk as a dark horse favorite, one who is just far enough from Lahoud

and just close enough to Syria to navigate successfully the difficult path to Baabda Palace.

#### THE UNIMPRESSIVE HEIR

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17. (C) Boutros said it would be nice to see Prime Minister Siniora with a good president; together, he said, the two could accomplish a lot. He worried, however, that Saad Hariri has set his sights on the prime ministership and that he is thoroughly unqualified for the job. Boutros said that Saad had recently sent two emissaries, including Boutros's longtime colleague, Bahije Tabbarah, to ask Boutros if he would see Saad and provide him with some "guidance." Boutros said he spent half an hour with Saad and was unimpressed. "He is unimpressive, personally. Average. No charisma, no personality, and," Boutros emphasized, "he has no experience. Not like his father at all. He had a big ego, but had vitality. Ideas. Saad is overconfident and naive. I told him it's too early for him to be prime minister. I told him, be a member of government first. Gain some experience, see how it works." Comparing Saad and Fouad Siniora, Boutros said that overall he was pleased with Siniora's performance, especially given the difficult circumstances of the past several months, and that what he has been able to accomplish has largely been due to his long years of experience in government.

18. (C) Returning to the future prospects for Baabda Palace and the Grand Serail, Boutros suggested that the U.S. enlist Saudi Arabia's support in Lebanon's political race. Boutros suggested, as have a number of other interlocutors before him, that the Saudis could play a positive role in endorsing Nassib's candidacy, and may also be able to dissuade young Saad from claiming the Grand Serail.

FELTMAN